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BEING PETER

IN JOHN MCPHEE'S 1977 classic, *Coming Into the Country*, he describes a typical Alaskan yard full of tarps, tires, oil drums, and dismantled snow machines, and comments that "when you drive along an old back road in the Lower Forty-Eight and come across a yard full of manufactured debris. . . you have come upon a fragment of Alaska. The people inside are Alaskans who have not yet left for the north." He's not mean-spirited in this; he makes an honest and reasonably accurate observation about what it takes to live in the north.

I long ago absorbed McPhee's remark into my own psyche, and in my travels I occasionally meet people whom I think of as "Alaskans who just haven't left yet." I mean that positively, and I mean that I recognize a kinship — perhaps in someone who's never even *thought* of Alaska. That person has a certain restlessness of spirit, a comfort in space

and quiet, and more than a streak of independence. He or she is capable of self-invention, or reinvention.

Alaskans — those of us who came here from somewhere else — tell similar stories: *I came over the hill* (or to the beach, or into the forest) *and knew I was home*.

And so it's clear to me that I was an Alaskan long before I knew I would make the physical move. I was a child with imagination, a sense of adventure, and a longing for something indefinably *more*. I would live in woods and by a lagoon, and I would fly. I don't mean airplanes. I mean *really fly*.

I became a sort of prototype of a future Alaskan.

I was Peter Pan.



I don't recall when or how the book came to me. I do remember that it had a jacketless green cloth cover, and I suppose it must have been a hand-me-down from my sister or brother once I'd gotten past the pious lessons of Dick-and-Jane schoolbooks. There might have been some illustrated plates tucked inside, but they're not what I remember. What I remember is reading word after word after word, and that the words made pictures and the pictures a world. And what a world it was! Children in their nightclothes flying past the stars, hollow trees dropping into an underground house, lagoons and pirate ships, stealthy Indians, fairies, a ticking crocodile, Peter Pan and his devoted boys. Words — mere words — could do all that. Well, words and *me*. Wasn't I taking those words into my brain and making from them something that was mine? Wasn't *I* the one inhabiting that magical land, having those outrageous adventures?

The unassuming cover, when the book lay closed beside me, had only its title and, beneath it, "J. M. Barrie." Who *was* this person? I had not, perhaps, thought much before about books being the creations of people. Books were books, objects that existed unto themselves. Had some one person actually written down this story and, if so, where had the story come from?

There was, of course, the televised version, the musical starring Mary Martin. My family didn't own a television when it was first broadcast, in 1955, but in subsequent years I counted myself among the millions of American children who awaited its annual appearance, who clapped mightily for Tinker Bell's recovery, who sang along with the songs. Each year I strove to learn more of the lyrics, but other than that, the movie seemed a tepid substitute for the book and for the stretches of my own imagination. Mary Martin was not my idea of Peter. She was so obviously a grown woman, with bound breasts inside her leafy boy costume, and the wired harness that sailed her across the stage was, well, *stupid*.



“Boy, why are you crying?”

I hear my child's voice, exactly how I coached Wendy to ask me, Peter, this early line from the book, and how Wendy — my friend, Phyllis, the sweetest, most Wendyish girl I knew — would repeat it back to me. And we would be off, with Judy and Paula and Lynn and whatever other members of the Peter Pan Club I had assembled in a New Hampshire backyard, to act out again the story of the fly-away children, the swearing fairy, and the rest. I pantomime rubbing my shadow with soap, Wendy tells me I'm ignorant and takes up her sewing, Tinker Bell flits and shouts “you silly ass,” and then I crow like a rooster, and we all crow and say “ass” and spread fairy dust around and run and leap and hold out our arms like wings.

“I'm flying!”

“I'm flying!”

“I'm flying!”

We're light on our feet and dancing in the air, and the feel of all that lightness and energy is almost exactly like soaring toward the stars, “straight on 'til morning.” Almost exactly, if you believe.

Lines from the book, or the movie, or my own acting out and teaching of the sacred text swarm back to me still, carrying with them every bit of sweet resonance from that world. I hear the crowing in my mind

and feel that satisfying catch at the bottom of my throat as the *ur-ur-ur-urrrrrr* tumbles out. I'm drawn back to all the defiance in the song I led us through again and again:

I won't grow up! I won't grow up!
I don't want to go to school. I don't want to go to school.
Just to learn to be a parrot. Just to learn to be a parrot.
And recite a silly rule. And recite a silly rule.
'Cause growing up means it would be
Beneath my dignity to climb a tree.
I'll never grow up, never grow up, never grow a-up, not me!
Not I!
Not me!!

For the longest time I thought the word in the third line was *parent*. Parent/parrot. The distinction wasn't all that crucial.



I was Peter because I had invented the Peter Pan Club and was its president. I suppose I selected all the members, although I don't remember there being any exclusivity, other than the disallowance of *boys*. We were an all-girls' club, and any girls who would have me as their leader could find a home in my pageant of lost boys and other free spirits. I assigned roles, and I found in my Michael, my John, my Tootles and Twins sufficient character to undertake the necessary and assorted conditions of servitude, silliness, and learning of lines.

"A little less noise there!"

"You silly ass!"

"Tut tut!"

"I complain of Nibs!"

"What would Peter do?" Peter, of course, would look between his legs at the slavering wolves, and they would all run away.

I don't, in fact, recall our play as a collaborative venture. I was the keeper of the text and the vision, as much a dictator as any Peter ever

was. Today, I'm embarrassed to say, I recall the *parts* better than most of the *girls*. The girls may have been my friends, my classmates and my companions in scouts and at Sunday School, but when we entered Neverland they were actors on the stage. The actual girls came and went; they switched roles as necessary and convenient. But Tootles was always Tootles, and Tinker Bell, Tinker Bell.

We certainly recognized that we were girls in a boys' story, but that was neither obstacle nor expressive of gender-identity confusion. We all knew that boys had more fun. Boys got to wear comfortable clothes and play sports. They got to ride bikes wherever they wanted and to disappear into woods for unexplained hours. Boy Scouts went camping and learned to tie knots. Girls were supposed to play quietly, preferably indoors, and cooperatively, as in rope jumping. Girl Scouts sewed aprons and sold cookies. For field trips our troop dutifully entertained old people and disabled children with patriotic songs.

As Peter I had not only the best part in the story but the best role I could think of, among all the stories I knew. Peter could fly *and* fight pirates. Peter took care of others (more spectacularly than Wendy, playing at being a mother). Peter was utterly adventurous, and he crowed like a crazy rooster. Storybook girls — even the ones with “pluck” — were too much in the real world for me, too serious, too likely to pursue moral rectitude. Nancy Drew in her little roadster was nowhere near my type. Peter was, quite simply, the self-contained, self-assured, freedom-loving escapee I would be.

And the name — I liked *Peter*. I liked the sharpness of the two consonant sounds, the cleanness of the whole. In the back of the dictionary, it was a name with a meaning — a solid Greek identity: *rock*. I had never cared for my own name — the nagging Ns, the soft and babyish C, the no-meaning except it was a little Ann and Ann had something to do with grace. *Nancy* didn't feel like me. *Peter* did. The club members called me Peter, and if anyone else wondered or looked askance, that didn't trouble me. When I heard *Peter*, I felt like I was someone, someone so much more solid than any Nancy could ever be.



If Peter's was a boys' story, it transformed under my command. Peter could fight pirates, but the gory business of swashbuckling and stabbing was not all that appealing, and I was repulsed by the idea that Peter — I — would have cut off poor Hook's arm. Plot elements, in fact, were much less interesting to me than what I would now call a more organic way of imagining life in Neverland. As our pack flew and fluttered, I was always careful to emphasize the physical points of the island we inhabited. We embraced the forest and slid through its hollow trees, coming and going from our secret hiding places. In long twining lines, and stopping to set our ears to the ground, we followed the paths of Indians and wolves. We sailed upon the fabulous lagoon, surrounded by jungle plants, birds in floating nests, and tail-kicking mermaids. There was that crocodile, too, but it always safely ticked.

As a club we practiced our flying techniques and put domestic order to our underground quarters. We concerned ourselves, like the women we pretended we would not become, with relationships. Wendy, cooking and sewing, cared for Peter and all the boys, and the rest of us acted at being annoyed with one another, letting loose small cruelties we might not have allowed ourselves in our real lives. We might tell the girl who was Tootles that she was eating too many cookies, but since we were telling Tootles and not the girl, and because our characters were known to be impolite, we could be as rude as we liked. *Tootles, you fat slob, don't eat all the cookies.* And of course, since I was president and captain, I could be just as bossy and demanding as I liked. I was Peter!

We could, however, also be solicitous. We gave flying lessons and encouragement to John and Michael while tossing fistfuls of fairy dust; told stories to the poor, ignorant, pram-fallen boys; released Tinker Bell each time she got locked in a drawer. We liked to get Twin and Twin confused. We followed Tiger Lily on soft little cat feet, and then we war-whooped and beat on drums. We sang, and the point was to sing like a bunch of lost boys who'd never had to face piano lessons or choir practice — badly and with as much volume and joy as possible.

Neverland nights were lit by balls of light that were fairies, and the air was filled with the sounds of little bells. These were not girly-girl ideas of fairies — prissy points of light and sweetness — but fairies with personality. “A quite common girl,” Peter explains Tinker Bell to Wendy, as if to excuse the fairy’s fits of temper and to diminish her magic. Her job in the fairy world, after all, was as a tinker — to mend pots and kettles for the other fairies. If the British, class-minded use of “common” escaped me, I at least got the joke — the counter to tinkling and twinkling and all the ordinary fairy orthodoxy. And Tinker Bell swore! When had we ever met such a fairy? We felt wild and reckless even as we were authorized — by a book. We twittered with Tinker Bell, as often as possible: “You silly ass!”

I don’t think I ever understood that J. M. Barrie was British and that his Peter Pan emerged from another time and culture. I only thought that he had to be a really smart person to have thought of all he had and to have invented such beautiful language, too. Captain Hook was “cadaverous” and “blackavised,” his “miscreants” “begirt with weapons.” Peter and the boys lived among the pampas, with coracles, sometimes in pandemonium and always with “ecstasies innumerable.” “Tut, tut” became my — and our — favorite commentary, applied with vigorous indiscrimination. You were late for school? Tut, tut! You had another peanut butter and jelly sandwich? Tut, tut! You need to go home now? Tut, tut, Tootles!

I shouldn’t forget the pirates. Although pirates did not belong to the club and I had taken on Wendy’s antiviolence position, we did sometimes engage with pirates, a.k.a. actual boys. On the school playground, if we didn’t wage mock battles, we did identify who the pirates were, and we did chase them back and forth across the territory, or — turning — let them chase us. We captured them, or they captured us, and then we shouted about the crocodile and, superior to pirates in every way, we flew off crowing.

I can only remember one pirate in particular — the one I appointed Captain Hook. He was a nice boy by the name of Bradley, and I secretly liked him. The reason I thought he made a good Hook was that, in

lieu of a hooked arm, he wore a brace on his leg. He had a thick shoe and the metal brace that stiffened his leg, and so he ran with a kind of lurch that seemed perfect for someone we would taunt as Hook. It did not occur to me at the time that singling out Bradley for his physical condition might have been unkind.



“A little less noise there!” we mocked the absent Mr. Darling.

The lack of adults in Peter’s world was precisely the main attraction. Peter, who ran away the day he was born, had done just fine without grown-ups telling him what to do. (As the song went, “Growing up is awfuller than all the awful things that ever were.”) Our Neverland, we knew, could not be imagined, much less entered, by anyone beyond the club. That was very much the point.

I remained in awe of J. M. Barrie. How could he — an adult — have so perfectly understood children? He knew we should be allowed to conspire among ourselves against the adult and proper world. He was our coconspirator.

And so the Peter Pan Club carried on in the margins of our otherwise organized world of school and scouts and family dinners. We didn’t advertise it to the adults in our lives, and those adults — if they overheard us bellowing out silly show tunes — didn’t impose on us. This was, of course, still a time when children were allowed to form their own alliances and invent their own play, as opposed to being scheduled for theater camps and matched-jersey sports teams. If I was too bossy, no adult withered me with a word or a sharp look. If we were reckless with one another’s feelings or physical well-being, no one interceded; we dealt with the consequences ourselves. Children were — the story said so — gay and innocent and *heartless*.

Parents could not understand *Peter Pan*, I thought, and that was all right; they weren’t meant to. Parents approved of pretty books, like the illustrated ones by Tasha Tudor my mother pressed upon me. *My Grandmother’s Doll* was all pastel sweetness, with no Indians, lagoons, or secret underground dwellings. Parents also liked instructive books: the

little engine that could if it kept trying, the little red hen that worked hard and got to eat her cake. There was no moral ambiguity in those texts, and nothing to send sparks streaking across the sky.



As inferior as I knew the televised play version to be, I always looked forward to its once-a-year appearance. Aside from the chance to learn more song lyrics, I especially liked the part where Tinker Bell drank the poison meant for Peter and had to be saved.

Quick! Quick! Her light's getting dimmer. If you believe in fairies, clap your hands!

Of course I clapped. Not because I believed in fairies, but because I believed in theater.

In general, I was not a believer. As the youngest child in my family, I'd never even had a chance with Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, and the idea of a God in the sky had always seemed to me equally improbable.

I couldn't believe in Peter Pan's magic, either, in the most literal sense. I did not, for example, leap off my bedpost or roof as some other Peter-enchanted children apparently did. (Much later I would read that fairy dust was added to the original play after too many children broke bones and knocked out teeth.) I'm sure I knew from the beginning that, really, there was no physical place resembling Neverland beyond the stars; there were no fairies, no children who could fly, not even any big dogs that could be trusted as nursemaids.

But, in another important sense, I *did* believe. I understood that *Peter Pan* was really about belief and the power of make-believe. A make-believe world could be real because it could make you want to believe it was, because you could will it into being so, at least in your mind. The imagination was a real place where a person could go, and the life found there could be richly detailed and as complete and satisfying as its possessor could wish. The important distinction was not between what was real and what was not but between the outer world and the inner one. When I was Peter I could create for myself a state of being that